

Historic, archived document

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.

16
1-6
FIRE IN THE WOODS

Address by David P. Godwin, Assistant Chief of the Division of Fire Control, Forest Service, U. S. Department of Agriculture, October 4, 1937, on the National Farm and Home Hour, broadcast by the NBC and network of 70 associated radio stations.

---ooOoo---

RECEIVED
OCT 29 1937

This is National Fire Prevention Week. We are giving thought to ways of keeping fire from causing harm to people and animals and homes and business places and farms -- and forests. Permit me to direct your attention to the part individual citizens can play in preventing forest fires.

There would be little need for a Fire Prevention Week if there was no human carelessness. Even when our minds are apparently awake, we do things thoughtlessly. Burns on the furniture and woodwork of the average house or apartment tell the story of the damage done by carelessly left cigarettes and matches.

Such burns pain property owners. But most of them do small damage. Not so with a cigarette or lighted match, tossed into the dry grass and pine needles along a lonely roadside in the woods. It may and too often does start a forest fire roaring over tens of thousands of acres, destroying millions of dollars in timber.

If those whose carelessness causes a forest fire, had to fight that fire, they would have a very different view of things.

Just six weeks ago, the news flashed across the country of the Blackwater fire on the Shoshone National Forest in Wyoming -- 15 men killed and 38 badly burned.

All forest fires are small at the start. This one was small when it began to smoulder in the pine needles at the bottom of Blackwater Canyon that Friday afternoon. But by dark of that hot, dry day, the flaming front of fire was moving rapidly up hill through the dense timber toward Coxcomb Mountain. The fire had burned over about a hundred acres when the District Ranger arrived with his first crew of fire fighters. They were in hard, precipitous country. Footing was treacherous and the elevation of eight to ten thousand feet made breathing difficult even in ordinary circumstances.

The first five men went to work driving through their control lines, cutting timber and brush and trenching to mineral soil. More men arrived and they pushed the lines on up along the flanks of the fire. Toward dawn the wind subsided and the fire fighters had hopes of closing their lines around the head of the fire. Fresh crews under the leadership of other Rangers arrived in the morning.

By this time the fire up ahead of the men had run over the ridge to the left and started down hill into the head of another watershed. Ranger Clayton and Ranger Post with their crews, took over this sector of the line. In the late morning and early afternoon the fire became comparatively quiet and work was proceeding systematically.

Then suddenly the wind sprang up to a gale. The fire burning on the ground leapt into the tree tops and roared down toward the men on the steep slope. Almost

(over)

at the same moment a spot fire that had blown across from the main fire, appeared on the slope below the line and this too was whipped up into the tree tops. The wind shifted and became erratic from these cyclonic drafts of hot air and the two great walls of flame rushed toward each other.

Just then Ranger Post who was on the advance line with his 45 men, received a note by messenger from Ranger Clayton to the rear, saying that Clayton and 7 men had gone down to fight the spot fire. Post knew it would be certain death for anyone to try to go back then.

As it was, his men had to be driven and helped up the steep slope. Soon it was apparent that the fire was overtaking them so rapidly they would never reach timberline. Post called a halt in a small open spot on a sharp rocky ridge and ordered the men to lie prone on the slope away from the onrushing flames. The heat and sparks were intolerable. The first blast of fire had scarcely gone down when the second fire swept up. The crew had to be forced across the rocky ridge to take shelter on the opposite side. Many could not endure the scorching heat and suffocating smoke - clothes were catching fire, exposed portions of the body were searing. Some jumped up screaming and praying. Ranger Post and his foremen repeatedly had to stand up to hold the men and force them down. Five men, maddened with the torture, broke away. Four of them died in the flames. After what seemed eternity, the fires spent themselves. Of the 40 men who remained, three later died.

Where was Ranger Clayton and his crew? Toward dark when it was possible to walk through the burned over area a search was started. Climbing the crest of a small ridge one of the searchers found the answer to the question. In the bottom of a sharp trough-like gulch huddled in a group and burned beyond recognition lay the crumpled bodies of Clayton and his 7 men.

The fire was over and gone. Nothing left but black dead trees and dead men. If such gruesome sights could be seen by those thousands of people who go into the woods every summer for camping and hunting and recreation, what a different attitude they would have. They would be careful!

That's what we most need for forest fire prevention -- people who are careful in the woods. Every forest fire affects every citizen. It raises taxes, throws men out of work, ruins places for recreation and endangers life. We fight the willful arsonist - the man who deliberately sets forest fires and today I call upon all of you to fight the "unconscious arsonist" - within yourselves - the tendency to be careless. Be careful with fire in the woods.

#####